



"Antisemitism Hurts" by Cindy Barukh Milstein
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always already felt dead. That you are one of the ghosts receiving this apology.

You're sorry too—that at some point your ancestors had to make the Sophie's choice, the impossible yet necessary nonchoice, time after time after time, of staying put or leaving. Some must have left, venturing north to places where they ultimately wouldn't be able to stay either, or you wouldn't be here. But you want to be here. Again. Still.

Antisemitism kills.

*Cindy Barukh Milstein writes, agitates, and rages, while holding firm to love and solidarity as verbs. They are never at home in this world, which is why they fight so fiercely for other possible ones. Milstein is especially proud of having crafted numerous magical, caring spaces out of "nothing" with and for others, including curated anthologies like *Rebellious Mourning: The Collective Work of Grief* (AK Press), *Deciding for Ourselves: The Promise of Direct Democracy* (AK Press), and most recently, *Constellations of Care: Anarcha-Feminism in Practice* (Pluto Press). You can find them on IG at @cindymilstein, Mastodon at @cbmilstein@kolektiva.social, and/or Bluesky at @cbmilstein.bsky.social. They offer thanks to Wren Awry, Shane Burley, and Ami Weintraub for their insights on a draft of this essay.*

This piece was written before the signifier "October 7."
If it had been penned after that date, it (sadly, painfully) would
have included more examples of "antisemitism hurts."
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with love and solidarity.

due to inquisitions, empires, colonization, and notions of blood libels or racial purity. People being appalled by QAnon yet omitting the Jewish conspiracy bundled at its core, or back during Occupy Wall Street, ignoring the thinly veiled antisemitic conspiracy theories related to “finance capital.” Or the man who pulled out a loaded gun, waved it in the air, and told you that he’s going to kill all the Blacks and Jews who get in his way.

Antisemitism hurts, too, even in the most beautiful of moments, like the first time you visited the city of Chana on Crete. It felt instantly, inexplicably, like home. Not a home in the present—though it felt that way as well—but a home you had come from and long lived in. A home where you wanted to stay put. A home torn from you—the “you” that is made up of your ancestors.

You’re standing outside the most dreamy squat you could ever imagine. It’s perched on the highest point above the ocean, with an expansively breathtaking view, including toward the old city across the harbor. The squat is not only a vibrant social center but also a collective home for Greeks and folks without papers from other lands, and you’re there at a gathering with hundreds of anarchists from across the Mediterranean, listening to their conversations about solidarity networks without borders for so-called immigrants and refugees. The building is enormous, with a gorgeous interior courtyard, and regal exterior; it’s been home to monarchs, military, secret police, and fascists, with a prison in the basement. Now, in a flourish of poetic justice, it’s in anarchist hands.

One of the local anarchists is standing by your side. “You’re Jewish, right?” he asserts more than asks, followed by, “I’m sorry.”

He points across the harbor, its waters dancing in the sun, at a tourist-romantic ancient neighborhood. “That was the old Jewish quarter. I’m sorry. We tried so hard to save you. We resisted the Nazis so hard in Greece, harder than most other places, and especially in Chana. But we lost. You were all murdered. I’m sorry.”

His “sorry” is personal, to and for you, collapsing time. It’s as if he can see into your bones and knows that this was in fact your home, many generations ago. That despite being alive, parts of you have

Antisemitism Hurts

Cindy Barukh Milstein



Hurt: still. We are moved because it hurts still.

We are not over it; it is not over.

—Sara Ahmed, “Feminist Hurts / Feminism Hurts”

One pond, two ramshackle farmhouses, ten acres, and some eighty anarchists, miles from anywhere. Tucked away on the hill where they’d pitched their tents, hoisting up red and black flags, they felt miles away, too, from the cares of the world. They were transfixed by fireflies in the tall summer weeds and marveled at all the stars in the clear deep sky. They felt the flames within themselves reignite again as they circled around a campfire, ashes and embers, banter and laughter, floating into the night, reverberating throughout the valley below.

Sometimes, during those ephemeral moments that you want to last forever, it feels like “there is a crack,” as Leonard Cohen wrote, “a crack in everything (there is a crack in everything) / That’s how the light gets in.” You look around at all the faces, flushed with a radiance that only comes from creating something magical together. You see old friends, new comrades, people who’ve inspired you, or

who you've learned from and been challenged by, helping you grow strong like the vegetables thriving in the garden on this land.

"Jews control the world."

He'd made a beeline for you. His nose is several inches from yours. You can smell that he's drunk. You think he must be joking.

"All Jews," he emphasizes, leaning in even closer. "All Jews!"

You can now almost feel the hairs in his nostrils. You can smell that he's adamant. He spews out a monologue that could have been lifted from *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, barely skipping a beat to hear your objections, until out of the corner of your eye you can see four or five other anarchist Jews crowding around him. "Us too?" "Yes, all Jews! You all control the world!" There's suddenly a cacophony of loud voices, overlapping. He stays nose to nose with you, the only Jewish co-organizer of this weekend bringing "prominent" anarchists from across the continent to one place, as if that in itself is confirmation of your global domination. You remember little of what you said, though at one point recall gesticulating wildly, likely affirming his notion of "the Jew," as you asked him, "If all of that is true, if we have that much power, why wouldn't all of us anti-Zionist Jews here free the Palestinian people?" He remains unmoved.

Later, under an expansive night sky, some friends made excuses for him, saying "he drank too much." Others at this do-it-ourselves theory conference preferred to abstractly debate the meaning of the terms "Semite" and "antisemite." Most simply ignored the whole incident, as if it didn't even register.

Only the anarchists who were also Jews came to your aid.

Your father just died, and your mother will follow him soon. You've been caring for them both and now need to dismantle the five-bedroom home they lived in for some four decades. Neither of them could throw anything away, and everyone in your family was fond of dragging free stuff into the house. It's a huge task, or mess, depending on your perspective.

After a few days of packing up a box of mementos for yourself and similar boxes for your three bio siblings, your anarchist ingenuity

immigrants, walked into the Tree of Life building, a place housing several synagogues, where Jews engaged in immigrant solidarity alongside their sacred rituals, and murdered eleven Jewish people.

Symbols have a history, a weight. They flag meaning. They carry warnings.

They are deadly serious.

Antisemitism hurts.

It hurts in the innumerable ways that other racist logics or patriarchy hurt. Deep-seated, pernicious ways. It hurts in everyday ways, like a leaky faucet.

Drip ... drip ... drip ... Slow, steady, persistent.

Drip ... drip ... drip ... Torturously louder with each drop.

Drip ... drip ... drip ... Impossible not to hear, impossible not to go crazy.

The faucet appears fine to everyone else, no matter how many times you drag someone over to look at it. "See? See! That bit of moisture there in the sink? Look closely!" It's hard to explain. It seems so trivial, so microscopic. What harm could it do? There's a drain, after all.

Drip ... drip ... drip ...

"It's just a little drop of water. What's the big deal? Actually, is it even dripping at all?"

Each of your anecdotes is just one more *drip* until the sink is overflowing. The room is flooded. You are drowning, gasping for breath, in a pool of water no one will admit that they see. A repair person who told you "don't Jew me" when they handed you a bill. One of your best friends repeatedly pushing Christmas on you, even after you mention that antisemites used to burn Christmas trees in village squares to scare your ancestors, and one time they put your kin in a synagogue and torched it. Supposed comrades telling you to "go back to Europe" although the last town your relatives escaped from before coming to the United States was razed to the ground and all of its Jews killed by the Nazis, and you've no idea all the places that your ancestors had to flee over the centuries and across continents

As the first evening with your friends winds down, one of them asks if it's OK to share a dilemma they're facing, and of course, you all say yes.

Just before you got to Pittsburgh, swastikas were painted on two anarchistic spaces, both of which include volunteer staffers and many visitors/users. Both spaces decided to cover up the tags and not tell anyone.

Your friend is distraught. Why, at a minimum, didn't the collectives alert folks coming into the buildings so that they could fully consent to the risk that fascists targeting spaces might imply? Why didn't they share photos of the graffiti widely with media or make public calls for community self-defense? Shouldn't this have been a rallying cry for collective outrage as well as solidarity against antisemitism and white nationalism? Isn't it a big deal?

Your friend is doubting the pain that their ancestors transmitted to them. How can a swastika become so detached from the targeting of Jews? How are we able to forget? You again witness the power of storytelling. You're distraught too.

So you and your friends devise a plan that respectfully but firmly demands that the collectives respond. The idea of action offers some relief to your friend. In hindsight, however, it's clear this was less about organizing a response than the comfort of what was, essentially, an informal grief circle—for yourselves and your ancestors.

The next day, your Jewish anarchist pals urge you to stay through Shabbat that weekend, not merely to keep processing the antisemitic incident, but especially to partake in the delight of radical, queer Jewish rituals. Stay, they nudge, to light candles, sing a capella songs together, and break communally from the time of capitalism for twenty-four-plus hours, moon to moon.

You're torn. You'd promised to do one last book event in nearby Toledo on Thursday night. Maybe you should cancel? It was a last-minute addition, and you're emotionally exhausted. Your Jewish guilt wins out, and you head northward, first to Ohio, and then home to mid-Michigan. Some twenty-four-plus hours later, you hear the news. In Pittsburgh, a white supremacist who hated both Jews and

takes over. You turn the whole space, from basement through first and second floors up to the attic, into a make-an-offer yard sale, from zero dollars up, but soon becoming a "really really free market."

For a week, you let people dig through the home you grew up in while you hang out in the living room. Folks bring you an individual item or create a pile of things. They feel awkward about naming a price, and you suggest "free." All you see are memories via association with objects you'd forgotten about. Then, touchingly, you get to hear folks explain the ways they're going to give their finds a good, new home.

You are, in essence, sitting shiva, though you only realize that in hindsight.

During those seven days, you're surrounded by a constant community. Each person asks why you're emptying out the house alone and giving everything away. They pepper you with questions—this is the chatty Midwest after all—and really listen. They come back another day to help with cleaning, or bring and share food. Almost everyone has hard-luck tales—this is the economically devastated Midwest after all—and so they tell you their stories of loss. You end up holding space for others' grief stories along with your own, as you gift the entirety of life in this home to others until only the bare walls and some dust bunnies are left. For you, there's deep truth in the phrase "May their memory be a blessing"—not their things.

Still, things matter to others.

More than a handful of folks—all at separate times over the seven days, and none of whom know each other—come rushing to you in the living room with a concerned look on their face. "Do you know there's a Jewish thing in the family room [kitchen, bedroom, ...]?" They are clearly trying to protect you, as if a Jewish thing stealthily crept into the house and bodes ill. "Yes, we're Jewish," you reply each time, as nonchalantly as you can, curious as to the response, which each time is the same. Incomprehension that someone, or you, could be a Jew, that Jewish things are in people's home in this midwestern town, and that you don't seem to be worried too.

She was the only other person in the ancient-looking basement locker room. You had that in common. You both swam laps, and at the precise same time. There was that in common too. And you both always awkwardly smiled at each other, until you broke the ice almost at once. It was then that you discovered you shared something else: the ability to speak German, though hers was mother-tongue exacting, and yours was rusty *schlecht*. Or *shlekht* in Yiddish, which you should have learned from your dad, but you only heard it used when his mother, your *bubbe*, “spoke” to him, always kvetching and screaming, as she transferred a lifetime of trauma onto her son.

Your pool pal was visiting the States from Berlin for a couple years while her partner studied here. You’d spent two years in Berlin with your former partner while they studied there. This commonality forged an empathy, not around that German city—she loved it, and you felt nothing but the unquiet dead blurring with the continuity of hate or exoticism toward the few remaining Jews—yet instead around how it feels to be away from home with no real purpose. You remembered swimming laps regularly in Berlin, especially at the first pool that Jews were banned from in Nazi times; it still boasted a 1930s’ fascist-realist sculpture carved outside its entrance, only a few blocks from where Jews were deported to death camps.

For weeks and then months, your friendship grows, always in this locker room. Time stretches out between when you arrive to change into your swimsuits and when you actually stop talking to get into the pool. Some days, you chat so long that you miss the allotted lap time. You share what seems like everything, from politics to ideas, from joys to hardships, and no matter how tough the emotions, she maintains an upbeat spirit. You realize how much you look forward to seeing each other—so much so that you finally begin speaking of getting together outside the dank basement, including visiting her when she returns to Germany. Autumn turns to winter turns to spring, as both your relationship and the locker room warm up.

“It’s hot as a gas chamber in here!” she exclaims one day, smiling, with a big wink of camaraderie.

You’ve never been good at hiding your feelings, which in split

here today? You feverishly survey the area around your great-grandparents’ stones: six or seven others are toppled in an intentional pattern.

Through fear and tears and confusion, you do a ritual for your great-grandfather. You tell him that you’ll right this wrong, gently touch his cold “body” in goodbye and comfort, place a kiss on your great-grandmother’s face.

You trudge through as many acres as you can on this bitter-cold birthday to see if there’s more damage, and find two other spots where some half-dozen graves are kicked over. As you walk, thousands of sad, wise-old porcelain eyes tell you that they’ve seen this before.

Later, when you go to the 1950s-looking cemetery office to see about having maintenance raise your ancestor’s stone from the dead, the woman behind the desk instantly nods her head as you say, “My great-grandfather’s tombstone was knocked over ...” and completes your sentence “... by fascists. Such are the times. Again.”

On October 23 and 24, 2018, you visit dear friends in Pittsburgh at the tail end of a monthlong book tour about loss and mourning.

At social centers, free schools, and radical bookstores, you’ve held grief circles. You’ve witnessed, time and again, people making themselves bravely vulnerable in front of others, sharing stories and tears that they’ve never expressed. You’re always struck by how much two seemingly simple acts—naming and talking about one’s deepest hurts and absences, and giving oneself permission to be fully present with whatever emotions arise—have the capacity to aid people in giving meaning to and bearing pain. There’s a reason that Judaism structures how we grieve so as to not leave one alone; so as to be embedded in community.

Your body has become a container for these stories. It’s an honor. And it’s a lot. So it feels good to be in a warm circle of friends, sharing a meal and laughter. It’s what you need, you realize, to wholly integrate the stories that people have entrusted into your own bodily memory.

numbers and letters that don't correspondence to what you see on the tombstones, because the system relies on scraps of paper taped or glued like post-its to the graves, and thus prone to falling off and composting with the dead below.

The first time you came here to find your great-grandparents' graves, it took you about two hours of fruitless wandering—even though they were supposedly right in or next to a socialist Jewish workers' section. You then spotted the only other person around for miles, a groundskeeper with a huge cross around his neck, and the two of you wandered for another hour or so. Once you found their graves, the groundskeeper decided to stay with you for an additional hour to chat about the history of this place and honor your great-grandparents because "I never see anyone coming to visit their people anymore."

This time, it again takes you about an hour. Numbers and letters have disintegrated even further, and there's no groundskeeper, but you know you're looking for two stones, side by side.

Then you see them: one gravestone upright, and the other knocked over.

Your great-grandfather is flat on his face. All you can see is his back, the smooth-gray rear of his stone, which is the height of person, lying as if murdered. His porcelain photo—his head—has been smashed to the ground. Your great-grandmother's porcelain-photo face—the woman who died just before you were born and so you were given a middle name to honor her (Bracha, meaning "blessing")—seems to be contorting with sorrow.

Your body feels as frozen as the January soil. Your mind transports you to the numerous Jewish cemeteries you've visited across eastern Europe, with most of their stones also knocked over, also smashed, broken by generations of antisemites, and yet somehow you are right here, wondering how out of the nearly two hundred thousand Jews, the fascists knew which were your great-grandparents, because plainly they're after you—a living, breathing anarchist and antifascist. They're probably still here, hiding behind trees, waiting to attack you, but how did they know you were coming

seconds appear on your face. From the way her face reacts, you're sure you have no need for words. You have none.

She repeats it, smiling more broadly, "Hot as a gas chamber, right?"

A silence fills the space between you.

"It's just a saying. You know. You have sayings here too, yes? It's a saying we use in Germany. It doesn't mean anything."

The locker room walls close in. Her smile is gone.

"I grew up saying it; my parents said it. I've used it my whole life."

She starts swimming at a different time and never speaks to you again, even though you never found the words to say something, anything, to her that last day, even the two words—although you know it was clear—"I'm Jewish."

The Signal thread is abuzz with shared intel.

A Confederate flag spotted on the back of a truck driving through town. "Some of us are heading out to keep an eye on him and get his license plate number."

Rumor of another white supremacist coming to do a public event. "Can we put pressure on the venue to cancel? If not, we'll need to ramp up our organizing."

Anti-Black graffiti on a Black person's front door. "There's going to be a rally and wheat pasting to counteract this racist shit. Let's reach out to see if the person needs other support."

The Signal group is a hodgepodge of progressive, lefty, socialist, communist, and anarchist folks. It's held together not by shared politics, other than the glue of antifascism, but a shared spirit of solidarity, in theory and practice.

Since you walk a lot, you're often the first to see white supremacist "street art." You snap a photo, upload it to the Signal chat with the location, and try to disappear the propaganda. It helps that you carry an array of stickers and a Sharpie; your keys will also do. And when something is too high, you know one of your fellow Signal pals who's good at climbing will deal with it soon, and others

will then keep an eye on that general vicinity in case new racist materials go up. It's all quite cooperative, amicable, and efficient.

One day, you spot an image of a skull. There's a hammer and sickle in one of its empty eye sockets, and a Magen David, or Star of David, in the other. The sticker bears the name of a group known for its explicit antisemitism: Blood and Soil.

When you send the image to the Signal thread, rather than the usual emojis of support, self-described white allies urge caution. "Maybe we shouldn't be taking down anti-Black stickers after all?" "What if Blacks don't want us to?" "What if removing such stickers means that these racists will take it out on Black people, maybe even with physical violence?"

Never mind that there are Blacks members of the Signal chat whom these allies feel compelled to speak for and that "Blacks" are suddenly now allegedly opposed to us taking down racist literature, with no mention that some Blacks are thrilled to help smash such symbols. Never mind that no one raised these concerns about any other instances of white supremacist materials; or that a Jew had spotted, shared, and said it felt scary awful to see this skull—threatening even—and yet it had felt super empowering to remove it. Never mind that no one thought to ask if "Jews" would feel endangered by fascist literature being trashed, or comforted that others would want to trash it.

It was almost as if no one saw what was right in front of their eyes: a simple six-pointed Jewish star in the hollowed-out eye of a dead person.

It's your birthday, which you've never liked and typically spend alone, trying to ignore the trauma that it brings up for you. You're driving between Michigan and Wisconsin to visit a sister. On impulse, you decide to mark this day after all by stopping halfway on the outskirts of Chicago to honor your ancestors—some anarchists, some Jewish, and some Jewish anarchists. It feels right on this day when usually everything feels wrong.

At the Waldheim Cemetery (now anglicized to Forest Home), you first pay homage to the Haymarket martyrs as well as Lucy Parsons, Voltairine de Cleyre, and Emma Goldman, all lying near each other. The tree branches are bare, the sky gray, the mementos that other radicals have left lie withered in this wintry-deserted graveyard. As is your ritual, you pick up the first stones that call out to you, and with intentionality, place one on each tombstone or monument. There are already other stones, especially on the granite markers of the Jewish anarchists. You feel in good company with recent comrade-visitors and your rebel predecessors.

Then you head over to the Jewish Waldheim Cemetery, or what more precisely could be called a shtetl for displaced persons who tried to make Chicago their home. Its unkempt two hundred acres contain some 175,000 Jews in what are actually almost two hundred associated cemeteries (apparently Jews couldn't agree on anything then either, but also couldn't imagine being without each other). The burial ground follows the history of Jewish refugee/undocumented waves, bookended with its start in the 1870s and tapering off by the 1950s. As Jewish mutual aid societies faded away, and tight-knit Jewish immigrant communities dispersed or died off, Jewish Waldheim nearly perished too. These days, it gets relatively few visitors, much less new occupants. It's now more of a time capsule, filled with those who escaped pogroms, forced conscription, the Holocaust, and other surges of genocidal violence.

There's something so schlepy-beautiful about this place, though. For one, there's no rhyme or reason for gravestone placement; the cemetery instead mimics the bustle of an overcrowded, congested nineteenth-century city. Many of the gravestones also boast little porcelain or tintype photos of the deceased, who by white Christian supremacist attractiveness standards might be considered disheveled, peasant-like, frumpy, but who stare out at you as if worrying, "Have you eaten? You look so skinny!" And the way you find a particular person's grave is a complex, nonlinear, always-in-need-of-reinterpretation system that would warm most Jews' hearts. It involves seven or more layers of